

ANALYZING *BOX OF SCHMU*:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE WEB SERIES
AND THE AESTHETICS OF INTERNET TELEVISION
A CREATIVE PROJECT
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Part One: Problem

Television remains the dominant medium. However, viewers are now able to bypass the television set, divorcing content from the technology it was once dependent on. With a computer (or mobile device) and a broadband Internet connection, programs past and present can be accessed at will. Not only does the Internet give viewers unprecedented control over the television experience, it enables them to be content generators with—in theory—the same access to audiences as commercial entities. The convergence of these media promises to fundamentally alter the way viewers think about television, perhaps redefining it. In essence, television will be what we watch, *not* what we will watch it on.

The creative project outlined in this paper is one example of a growing trend: the Web series, or serialized television produced exclusively for Internet distribution. Unlike a traditional broadcast series, the means to produce and distribute a Web series are available to nearly anyone. As a result, viewers can watch content produced both commercially (e.g., spin-offs of popular broadcast shows like NBC's *Heroes*) and independently (e.g., niche series *The Guild*).

While Web series have existed for a little over a decade, the proliferation of broadband Internet, improvements in the quality of streaming video and the decreasing cost of video production have led to their rapid growth over the last few years. Still, few

find success, either in terms of viewership or financial gain. At first glance, those that have seem to have little in common. Some series boast industry talent and high production values, others are produced by unknowns with limited resources. However, there are shared characteristics that distinguish them from other online productions. Successful Web series frequently offer narratives unique from those found on broadcast television. These narratives are specifically designed to engage niche rather than mass audiences. Series are often set in virtual environments outside everyday reality. They cultivate online communities and encourage interactivity.

The objective of the creative project will be to illustrate these characteristics through example, in this case, an original Web series titled *Box of Schmu*. While a handful of episodes were written and produced, the project is comprised solely of the show's pilot. Therefore, the following will only discuss this first episode, as it will be an effective enough demonstration of the above.

Part Two will review existing literature on television's transformation as a result of the Internet and other technological developments. Additionally, it will briefly examine the success of two popular Web series. Part Three will outline the approach taken with the creative project and how it relates to the stated objective. Part Four will discuss the results of the project and what understandings were derived as a result. Finally, Part Five will identify the conclusions reached and the project's limitations, as well as provide recommendations for similar creative projects.

Part Two: Literature Review

According to Nielsen's Three Screen Report from last year, the average American watches video on a traditional television set more than anywhere else (2009). The Council for Research Excellence's "Video Consumer Mapping Study" later confirmed the finding, reporting that TV still accounts for more than 99 percent of viewers' screen time (2009). However, online audiences continue to grow. Last fall, comScore reported that 84.8 percent of all U.S. Internet users (more than 168 million people) watched video online during the month of September (2009). A Pew Internet report from the same period found the number of adults watching video on the Web nearly doubled since 2006 (Madden, 2009, p. 3). But it isn't just the Internet that's changing the way viewers consume video. DVRs (Digital Video Recorders), VOD (Video On Demand), mobile phones and portable devices (e.g., iPod) are permanently altering our understanding of television itself.

Amanda Lotz, Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, claims we're entering a "post-network" era, one where technological developments "have both liberated the place-based and domestic nature of television use and freed viewers to control when and where they view programs . . . Viewers face more content choices, more options in how and when to view programs . . . Increasingly, they have even come to enjoy the opportunity to create it themselves" (2007, p. 5). The ability

to watch whatever we want, how we want and when we want has diminished television's role as a mass medium. "The U.S. television audience . . . is more accurately understood as a collection of niche audiences" (Lotz, 2007, p. 5).

Make no mistake; regardless of the technology being utilized, people are still watching television. MIT Director of Comparative Media Studies Henry Jenkins describes what is happening as the adoption of new "delivery technologies." Internet video isn't replacing television. It *is* television, just consumed in an entirely different way. "[H]istory teaches us that old media never die—and they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 13). And the tools are becoming increasingly complex. Television sets are beginning to resemble computers, computers are beginning to resemble television sets and mobile technology resembles everything. Still, Jenkins rejects the notion of viewers eventually depending on a single "black box" for all their media content. "We actually depend on several such boxes . . . because no one is sure what kinds of functions should be combined, we are forced to buy a range of specified and incompatible appliances" (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 14-15).

Viewers watch television, but it matters less and less what they watch it on. "[T]elevision is less defined by how the content gets to us and what we view it on than by the set of experiences and practices we've long associated with the activity of viewing" (Lotz, 2007, pp. 29-30). Of course, viewers aren't just consuming television, they're creating it and the Internet allows them access to a worldwide audience. User-generated content is likely watched more than any other online. Google sites, predominantly YouTube, accounted for more than 40 percent of the videos viewed on the Internet in

September, putting them far ahead of any other Internet video provider (comScore, 2009).

Networks are offering much of their prime time programming free on their web sites as well as on content providers like Hulu. Forrester Research analyst James McQuivey says the networks are attempting to lure viewers back to their television sets (“TV on the Internet,” 2007). What they’re actually doing is speeding up the transition to new delivery technologies. Some viewers are using the Web to time-shift their TV schedules and where they go advertisers follow.

Some are encouraging this transition. Disney is developing what they refer to as their “Keychest” technology, which “could contribute to a shift in what it means for a consumer to own a movie or a TV show, by redefining ownership as access rights, not physical possession. The technology would allow consumers to pay a single price for permanent access to a movie or TV show across multiple digital platforms and devices” (Smith, 2009). Apple is looking to provide a \$30 a month subscription service that would allow iTunes customers to view select television programs through its software (Kafka, 2009); Windows Media Center in Windows 7 is making it easier for users to access television content online (Albrecht, 2009). And in Britain, “the BBC and several partners are working on a more ambitious project to bring what is called catch-up TV and a variety of other programming and interactive services to television sets as soon as next year” (Pfanner, 2009).

With new technologies come new methods of storytelling. In particular, the Web series format has attracted many independent producers. The quality and popularity of a few series have led to deals within the industry, blurring the line between amateur and

professional. One of the most successful is *The Guild*, an award-winning Internet sitcom that began on YouTube three years ago. The show follows a group of online gamers from the perspective of guild member Cyd Sherman, known online as Codex. Most episodes run between three and eight minutes, beginning with Sherman addressing the audience directly as though recording a video podcast (a narrative device common among many Web series). Episodes advance a season-long story. It might take as many as three or four installments before a season's central conflict emerges. *The Guild* was primarily funded by audience donations until creator Felicia Day signed an exclusive distribution deal with Microsoft.

The Guild later inspired writer-director Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly*) to independently produce the comedy-musical *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, casting Felicia Day alongside stars Neil Patrick Harris and Nathan Fillion. The miniseries tells a self-contained narrative, split into three 15-minute "acts." *Dr. Horrible* follows its title character as he tries to gain entry into The Evil League of Evil and win the heart of long-term crush (and Laundromat friend) Penny. Horrible's efforts are repeatedly thwarted on both fronts by superhero Captain Hammer. *Dr. Horrible* was surprisingly successful, viewed over two million times in its first week. It made back its production costs on sales of the soundtrack alone (Vary, 2008). It's also the first Web series to be awarded an Emmy.

Felicia Day argues both shows were successful because they appealed to niche audiences. "The web should be the place to tell stories and present characters that haven't been seen; to cast actors in roles that would never get hired by a network. *Dr. Horrible* engaged [its] audience in [a] revolutionary way. Why? Because no studio executive

would have greenlit a 45 minute musical-comedy about a supervillain” (Day, 2009). It’s a lesson that would benefit the industry as much as it has independents. “Commercial broadcasters now have more of a reason to create programming that closely matches the specific tastes of discreet audience groups because audience members are more likely to pay for programs they are fans of, rather than programs they watch just to pass time” (Lotz, 2007, 141).

Television is in a state of transition, both as a technology and a medium. It remains to be seen if the Web series will become prominent (or profitable) enough to significantly offset viewership of traditional broadcast and cable television, but the production and consumption of content will undoubtedly change—as it has all throughout television history. The next part will outline the production of *Box of Schmoo* and how it’s narrative and technical approach incorporates the insight gained by the success of both *The Guild* and *Dr. Horrible*.

Part Three: Method

Box of Schmu is a Web series following the exploits of three college students and Mr. Schmu Schmu. He's a musical pygmy lion on the run from Cheeftan Mews, a biotech company that patented him as intellectual property. Together they solve mysteries while helping Mr. Schmu Schmu avoid capture. The show's tone is decidedly postmodern, shifting from absurdist satire to light melodrama at the turn of a phrase, a characteristic commonly associated with Joss Whedon's work and increasingly with television at large. If Felicia Day is correct, then *Schmu*'s success depends on it offering something an audience couldn't find on broadcast or cable television—something that appeals to a niche audience. *Schmu*'s narrative incorporates (and subverts) tropes common amongst 1970s cartoons as well as employing referential humor (a staple of animated sitcoms since the '90s). It should more than suffice.

Seeing as this creative project is a "pilot" episode for an ongoing series, viewers shouldn't expect a self-contained narrative. The first episode introduces the characters, their relationships and the overall tone. While Mr. Schmu Schmu is the title character, he's also the show's central mystery. The audience is first asked to identify with the human characters, understanding that human beings are easier to sympathize with than a puppet lion. Like *The Guild*, the central conflict is merely hinted at and future installments would further establish Mr. Schmu Schmu's predicament.

Early Web series avoided long running times, as audiences weren't accustomed to watching video online. However, the duration of webisodes will likely become a non-issue as the quality of streaming video improves and more viewers time-shift television programming utilizing sites like Hulu. The average episode of *Box of Schmu* will run approximately 15 minutes rather than the more common three or five. Remember, installments of *Dr. Horrible* also ran 15.

Another Web convention is the avoidance of wide shots. The logic behind this is sound: wider shots play better on larger screens. Seeing distant human figures on a computer screen reduces said figures to the size of tiny ants. Still, even that will cease to be an issue as people start viewing content on hybrid Internet-television sets. Users can and already do watch full-length Hollywood movies on screens as small as that of an iPod. As consumer behavior adapts to new technologies, so will the way Internet television is produced. *Schmu* will rarely be shot any wider than what's commonly accepted as a medium shot, but that isn't to say wider shots will be avoided altogether. Compositions will be chosen for their adherence to the show's aesthetic and themes and how well they advance the narrative.

Schmu is shot in front of a green screen, with vectored video and still images inserted as backgrounds in post-production. There are a number of reasons for this approach. First, broadcast and cable television exhibits production values unavailable to this project. Other Web series (*Sanctuary*, *Previously on Point Dume*) are shot this way to accommodate for small budgets and limited resources. Second, the "illustrated" backgrounds provide *Schmu* a unique aesthetic separate from more conventional shows. Finally, it's thematically appropriate. It's clear from the synopsis that *Schmu* is skeptical

on the life patent issue and would eventually have something to say on the commoditization of life, which first requires objectification. With this approach—and the flat compositions of each shot—the world these characters inhabit is abstracted to the point of no longer being recognizable as a living environment.

Together, the narrative and aesthetic of *Box of Schmu* create a viewing experience unlike that found on broadcast television. It doesn't cater to a mass audience, but rather is designed for a niche one: media-savvy college-age adults who might appreciate its postmodern plotting and humor. If being successful as a Web series requires *Schmu* to distinguish itself as being unique to the Internet, then the show shares with *The Guild* and *Dr. Horrible* those characteristics which made them successful with viewers.

Part Four: Results and Discussion

Web series attempting to replicate broadcast programming offer nothing that can't be found by turning on a television set. The Web currently attracts a small viewing audience. An original series is unlikely to draw a larger one unless it can distinguish itself from more conventional fare. The narrative of *Box of Schmu* is unique. Few broadcast shows are interested in satire; fewer would feature a mute puppet and a gay man as two of their main protagonists. Throw in a mystery involving spies, music bloggers, and a villainous pair of gloves and you have a recipe for cancellation.

It isn't surprising that niche series are successful. Niche is what the Internet does best. Users know this and take advantage of it, finding Web sites, blogs, and communities that reflect their specific values and interests. People go online to find people just like them. A Web series can take advantage of that fact, tailoring itself to a niche audience without fear of cancellation. On the other hand, broadcast television is driven by the need for large audiences. Or large *enough*, seeing as viewership is divided up amongst an increasing number of channels. Looking again at its narrative, it's clear *Schmu* wasn't designed for a mass audience. *Schmu* will appeal more to a twenty-something, media savvy audience, familiar enough with genre tropes to enjoy seeing them subverted.

Niche shows often equate to genre shows, featuring worlds and characters outside of everyday reality. Sometimes it means the technical presentation constitutes a virtual

reality. Shot utilizing green screen and featuring stylized background environments, *Schmu* doesn't take place in the world we inhabit. The inherent fakeness of *Schmu* distinguishes it from everyday experience.

The success of a Web series frequently depends on the cultivation of online communities. For *Schmu*, this meant utilizing social networking sites. A Facebook page and Twitter feed were created months before production began. Along with a blog for users outside the social networking sphere, these sites followed *Schmu* from script to post-production. Every stage of the show's creation was documented on video. Both Facebook and Twitter encouraged interaction with the cast and crew. Potential viewers were meant to feel as though they were part of the production—and instrumental to the show's success.

Schmu's first episode presents a linear narrative. Unfortunately, this doesn't provide a lot of opportunity for interactivity. The Internet allows for the creation of non-linear, user-driven narratives. A Web series in that vein would offer an experience totally separate from broadcast television. While the potential for interactivity is recognized, *Schmu*, like most of the Web series before it, adheres to traditional storytelling. Provided the appropriate resources were available, it would be interesting to see how audience interaction would drive future episodes.

Part Five: Final Overview

The television set remains viewers' primary means of watching video, but technological developments are blurring the distinction between screens. As the traditional set increasingly resembles a computer, content will likely be emphasized over technology—redefining television as video conforming to a specific set of conventions or characteristics. Still, the Internet and broadcast television have yet to fully converge. Currently, both remain separate delivery systems. With online viewership scarce, the success of the Web series depends on producers taking advantage of the Internet's unique storytelling possibilities.

Box of Schmu, the creative project examined here, was made to illustrate why a small number of independently produced Web series have found success when most do not. *The Guild* and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* offer narratives unique from those on broadcast television, appealing to niche audiences and cultivating online communities. *Schmu* took a similar approach. Unfortunately, it's impossible to know now how successful *Schmu* will be. Other variables, like Web visibility, can prevent it from finding an audience.

At best, *Schmu* requires a significant time investment before the narrative coalesces. At worst, the story is too complex for the format. Admittedly, it might be too much to ask viewers to sit through two 15-minute episodes before they can anticipate

where the show is heading. The premise is original enough, but future Web series should consider starting simple in order to draw in their audience faster.

The biggest drawback in terms of production was the use of green screen. While intended to make shooting easier, it had the opposite effect. Securing studio space was difficult, sometimes impossible. Production was put on hold for nearly a month while waiting for a studio undergoing renovations to become available. One evening's shoot took place before those renovations were completed. This meant both the lighting and sound were compromised. Footage was difficult to manipulate and a significant amount of reverb can be heard in the soundtrack. Ultimately, *Schmu* would have been better shot on location. The approach taken wouldn't be nearly as painful now, but it's recommended that future productions thoroughly investigate their studio options before committing to a similar style.

In conclusion, *Box of Schmu* illustrates Web series are best served by ignoring the conventions of broadcast television, taking advantage of the Internet's unique storytelling possibilities. Television is evolving. The changes it'll undergo these next few years promise to redefine the medium. The innovative content produced for the Internet today might very well define the conventions of tomorrow.

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